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ABSTRACT

The way job positions in English studies are conceptualized, advertised, applied for, and awarded is defined by the conventional contours of literary study. The precision with which the "Job Information List" breaks down literature positions by national and historical categories reflects the desire of a great many departments to hire and train according to these classifications. The grafting of "rhetoric and composition" onto this system is fraught with problems. Departments that assume disciplinary status and uniformity, and submit an ad with no clear hiring criteria beyond the label "rhetoric and composition" may have no clear sense of who and why they are hiring. Three recommendations are in order. The first is to hiring departments: construct a one-page description of your department's position which includes the kind of preparation that typifies the ideal candidate and those matters that the application should address. The second is to those who train Ph.D. students in rhetoric and composition: use professional training seminars and ad hoc job search instruction to prepare students for interviews with schools unlike your own. The third is to aspiring applicants: avoid the scattering-gun form-letter approach. Target jobs you want and locate college catalogs and bulletins. Relate your experience to the hiring department. (TB)

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Disciplinarity and the Job Search, 1995

It would be difficult for any of us to move through this conference without encountering some version of the debate about composition's disciplinarity. Those who would insist that composition is a discipline might point to a variety of disciplinary practices to make their case: conferences, scholarly journals and presses, the theorization of practical activity and not least of all, disciplinary reproduction--the growth of graduate programs in composition and the expectation of specialized professional employment. I want to suggest (because this particular format does not allow me time to argue) that hiring practices appropriated from the discipline of literary studies poorly serve aspiring composition applicants and their potential employers.

It will come as no surprise to anyone to point out that the way positions in English studies are conceptualized, advertized, applied for, and awarded is defined by the conventional contours of literary study. The precision with which the Job Information List breaks down literature positions by national and historical categories reflects the desire of a great many departments to hire and train according to these classifications. Debates about hegemonies, the canon, and cultural studies notwithstanding, there is a good deal of uniformity between training and hiring in

literature. Advertisements typically state little more than national historical period because little more is necessary to bring appropriate parties together.

The grafting of "rhetoric and composition" onto this system is fraught with problems. The practice of advertising jobs as "in composition" or "in rhetoric" is a subscription for rhetorical failure in the hiring process. Departments that assume disciplinary status and uniformity, and submit an ad with no clear hiring criteria beyond the label "rhetoric and composition," may have no clear sense of who and why they're hiring. Like a poorly written assignment, a poorly developed ad invites indeterminacy and a bewildering diversity of response. Ultimately the hiring department will define what "rhetoric and composition" means at the local level. The time to do that is when writing the ad.

Applicants must realize that a hiring department will be interested in an applicant's disciplinary knowledge largely to the extent that it conforms to the definition of "composition and rhetoric" locally, regardless of the level of disciplinary awareness suggested by the ad. It is fair to say that the vast majority of those hired "in" composition will be hired by personnel committees largely unaware of the conversations taking place in CCC, let alone Pre/Text or JAC. The point here is not at all to batter the uninformed, but to encourage composition applicants to "learn globally, apply locally." The letter of application that refers to the hiring school only in the opening

line foregrounds itself as rhetorically formal and allows the inference that whatever the applicant knew about reader-based prose has been momentarily forgotten. Chances are good that the personnel committee at South by Southwest State is not going to see a connection between the rhetorical implications of Gasche's work and its freshman writing program until an applicant makes such a connection explicit in a language understood at South by Southwest State.

This, of course, is the stuff of freshman composition. Yet it is astonishing to discover that the majority of applicants who define themselves as specialists in rhetoric and composition write the most important letters of their careers without any sense of the situatedness of their readers. One might surmise that the letter of application is a generic form and that its production does not necessitate concrete audience analysis. This would be an attractive explanation except that the majority of applicants who are granted interviews arrive at the MLA convention continuing to assume that disciplinary knowledge alone will carry them through the interview. And, not surprisingly, one candidate's sense of disciplinary knowledge--because rhetoric and composition hardly qualifies as a discipline in any conventional sense--can be radically different from another's.

What Stephen North has written about practitioners and practitioner lore might well be said of PhD students in composition: -"while we might say that [the field] has a shape, a front and back and so on, just where any [student] locates these

depends entirely on where he or she enters, and on who . . . does the showing around" (Making of Knowledge 28). A new PhD cannot rely on her dissertation committee to forcefully remind her that the conception of "composition and rhetoric" constructed by her doctoral program might not be recognized anywhere outside the program. Some of the best candidates each year go jobless because assumptions about composition and rhetoric's disciplinary status prevent them from explicitly connecting their preparation to the needs of hiring institutions. I have three recommendations:

1. **For hiring departments:** Carefully construct a one-page description of your department's position which includes the kind of preparation that typifies the ideal candidate and those matters that a letter of application should address. Describe the job as fully as possible in the Job Information List, but request that all interested applicants first request the job description statement.
2. **For those training PhD students "in" rhetoric and composition:** Use professional training seminars and ad hoc job search instruction to prepare students for interviews with schools *unlike* your own. Recognize that "mock interviews" that do not correspond with "mock jobs" are of little value.
3. **For aspiring applicants:** Remember that you've been trained to make the worse case sound the better. You can relate Gasche to the freshman writing program at South by Southwest

State. The mistake is in not doing so. Avoid the scatter-gun, form-letter approach. Target jobs you want and locate college catalogs and bulletins. Relate your experience and training to the hiring department. Do not rely on your advisors to train you for the job search. Above all, do not assume that your program's particular brand of disciplinary knowledge is adequate preparation for the job search.

Works Cited

North, Stephen. The Making of Knowledge in Composition.

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